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Debunking School Board Puffery

Recently, the Pennsylvania School Boards Association launched a public awareness campaign—Pride and Promises—to promote the value of public education. The overarching message of the campaign is to “focus on the achievements of Pennsylvania education students, past and present”. One of the purposes of the campaign is to “highlight the essential role of school board members in public education.” Apparently, the PSBA is feeling unappreciated.

At a time when state lawmakers are focusing on reforming school funding, the Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA) is trying to divert the public’s attention away from the fact that school property taxes represent the largest burden the average taxpayer faces. The PSBA’s Pride and Promises campaign seems to be an attempt to say: “You’re getting your money’s worth; so why all the controversy?”

Since 1985, school property tax collections and state funding for K-12 education in Pennsylvania have risen nearly two and half times faster than inflation. With enrollment rising only slightly over the same period, the jump in total spending has produced a doubling of per-student outlays. Amazingly, the PSBA brags about the ability of its members to “continue to keep adequate school funding at the top of the list of the most important educational concern facing public schools.”

The PSBA’s self-congratulation would be more justified if students’ academic performance had shown significant improvement. However, Pennsylvania’s performance on the SAT continues to languish near the bottom compared to other states. The PSBA Fact Sheet proudly proclaims that from 1991 to 2001, SAT scores increased by 12 *percent* on the math component and by 5 *percent* on the verbal. This is a complete misrepresentation of what happened. As the table below shows the actual increases were about 2.5 percent for math and 1 percent for verbal. It is unknown whether the PSBA misrepresentation is deliberate or merely incompetence in analyzing data. Furthermore, the PSBA did not bother to tell us that Pennsylvania’s SAT national ranking remained stagnant at 45th in 1991 and 2001 before falling to 46th in 2002.

SAT Scores	Verbal	Math	Total
1991	495	487	982
2001	500	499	998
<i>Percent Change</i>	1.0	2.5	1.6

An attempt is always made to excuse Pennsylvania’s poor SAT showing by resorting to the argument that the Commonwealth has a higher percentage of students taking the college entrance exam than do the states with better scores. The obvious question: How does Pennsylvania’s SAT performance in 2002 compare with other high participation rate states? The following table shows that Pennsylvania has the lowest SAT scores among the ten states with the highest student participation rates.

2002 SAT Scores State	Verbal	Math	Total	Participation Rate (%)	State	Verbal	Math	Total	Participation Rate (%)
Connecticut	509	509	1018	83	Rhode Island	504	503	1007	73
New Jersey	498	513	1011	82	Pennsylvania	498	500	998	72
Massachusetts	512	516	1028	81	Vermont	512	510	1022	69
New York	494	506	1000	79	Maine	503	502	1005	69
New Hampshire	519	519	1038	73	Delaware	502	500	1002	69

The PSBA boasts about the reduction in student-teacher ratios as one of its proudest accomplishments. The PSBA Fact Sheet says, “the majority of Pennsylvania public school classrooms (52.3%) have 23 or fewer students, with 20 or fewer students in 29.8%.” Again, they don’t comment on the failure of academic achievement to improve. Moreover, an April 2002 report by the Allegheny Institute found there is no significant statistical relationship between lower student-teacher ratios and academic performance, across the country or among the 501 school districts in Pennsylvania.

Indeed, reduction of class size can be counterproductive in terms of education quality in cases that require the hiring of less able teachers. As we noted in a Policy Brief (Vol.2 No. 8), there are substantial concerns about would-be teachers who have recently taken the Pennsylvania Teacher Certification tests. Our analysis reveals that, “in 43 of 58 (74 percent) testing categories reported by the Bureau of Teacher Certification, the median score for Pennsylvania test takers was lower than the national median.”

In short, reducing student-teacher ratios represents yet another unproven program implemented by educrats and hailed by the PSBA with no follow up analysis to see if it actually led to improved academic performance. All we know for sure is that the number of dues paying members of the teachers’ unions has increased and taxpayers are having to dig deeper.

If the members of the Pennsylvania State School Boards Association were serious about improving the quality of education in the Commonwealth, they would abandon the “Pride and Promises” campaign and focus on assisting state lawmakers to develop policies that lower costs, improve accountability and performance while reducing the tax burden to state and local taxpayers. If the PSBA can achieve these goals, there will be no need for a self-promoting campaign.

Frank Gamrat, Ph.D. Senior Research Associate

Jake Haulk, Ph.D. President

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Allegheny Institute for Public Policy
 305 Mt. Lebanon Blvd.* Suite 305* Pittsburgh PA 15234
 Phone (412) 440-0079 * Fax (412) 440-0085
 E-mail: aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org